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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how undergraduate student interns were utilized in a one-person institutional research office on a small college campus to improve productivity and provide real-life experiences for upper-class students. The pitfalls and benefits of such use of students are discussed from both the students' and institutional researcher's perspective. Responses to a student intern survey are provided in which students were asked what skills they learned while they were interns; whether they were able to apply these skills elsewhere; in what ways the intern experience helped them in their major and planned career; suggestions they had for improving the internship experience; the most interesting aspects of the internship; and how they would rate their overall experience. Suggestions are made for incorporating such students into the institutional research function. The paper concludes with the observation that internship experiences such as the one described are not only useful in providing hands-on experiences for undergraduates while they are still in college, but also having such persons assisting on various in-house projects enables the office to be more productive. (GLR)

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THE UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH INTERN:

THE WIN-WIN SOLUTION FOR STUDENT AND OFFICE

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THE UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH INTERN: THE WIN-WIN SOLUTION FOR STUDENT AND OFFICE

ABSTRACT

The daily practices of institutional research offices offer appropriate internship experiences for undergraduate students in several disciplines. The author describes how interns were utilized in a one-person institutional research office on a small college campus to improve productivity and provide real-life experiences for upper-class students. The pitfalls and benefits of such use of students are discussed from both the students' and institutional researcher's perspective. Suggestions are made for incorporating such students into the institutional research function. Any institutional research professionals interested in providing mentoring activities for students at their school could benefit from this paper.

for Management Research, Policy Analysis, and Planning

This paper was presented at the Thirty-Second Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research held at the Atlanta Hilton & Towers, Atlanta, Georgia, May 10-13, 1992. This paper was reviewed by the AIR Forum Publications Committee and was judged to be of high quality and of interest to others concerned with the research of higher education. It has therefore been selected to be included in the ERIC Collection of Forum Papers.

Jean Endo
Chair and Editor
Forum Publications
Editorial Advisory Committee

THE UNDERGRADUATE INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH INTERN: THE WIN-WIN SOLUTION FOR STUDENT AND OFFICE

Introduction

The attempt by academic departments to provide real-life internship experiences for their undergraduate students provides an opening to institutional research practitioners who wish to mentor these students while providing (possibly at no departmental cost) a way to improve their office's productivity. This last point should not be lost on institutional researchers who are facing budget constraints for various reasons.

In effect, this use of undergraduate students in intern positions is an extension of the present utilization of graduate assistants in institutional research offices on larger campuses where there are graduate programs in disciplines related to institutional research. The internship is also an extension of the use of work/study students in institutional research offices; whereas these students (particularly early in their college experience) are usually used in data entry and clerk tasks, it is possible by their junior or senior years that they have developed sufficient cognitive skills and work experience to function at a higher level.

The theoretical underpinnings for such intern opportunities is derived from the literature demonstrating the benefits of student-faculty interaction, particularly in the development of cognitive skills (see studies cited in Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, pp. 101-102, 149-150). This is particularly appropriate where the

institutional researcher on the small college campus is also a part-time professor. In the situation reported here, however, the institutional researcher is a full-time administrator; yet, the research is still relevant to this role model/mentoring situation.

This paper will present the results of using undergraduate student interns in a one-person institutional research office on a small college campus, describing the steps taken to initiate the internships with appropriate academic departments and the types of activities done by these interns, and providing an evaluation as to their effectiveness and usefulness in such a setting. The discussion will include suggestions for utilizing such interns on other campuses, with recommendations based on the present experience. In so doing, it is hoped that institutional researchers in all academic settings will benefit from the presenter's experience.

Methodology

Prior to assuming his present position, the presenter directed an institutional research office in a small doctoral university. While he was the only professional in this office, there was considerable student employment (60 hours/week) and a graduate assistant in the office. Several times during the decade spent in this position, there were occasions when qualified junior and senior students were assigned to and successfully completed research projects similar to those of the graduate assistants. This experience was noted by the college president during the interview process for the present position, with the comment that the previous

supervisory experience with such students lent itself to the concept of using interns within the institutional research office. It was this comment that led, less than two years later, to the implementation of the internship program.

After receiving administrative encouragement to institute such internships, the institutional researcher notified the chairs of the business administration and economics, mathematics, psychology, and sociology departments of a potential internship position within the institutional research office. This notification identified the advantages for such an experience to both the participating student(s) as well as to the institution.

Among the advantages provided the intern were an opportunity to gain hands-on experience in a full-service institutional research office under the supervision of an experienced professional. Included in this experience would be the opportunity to observe and discuss such areas as office and personnel management, research ethics, and current issues and practices in research administration, particularly in the higher education sector.

The special activities in which an intern could be involved included survey and research design, instrument development, data gathering, coding and entry, statistical analysis, graphic and tabular presentation, and report writing. The extent to which any or all of these would be involved would depend on the intern's own interests and qualifications and the nature and timing of the project(s) available.

Optimally, interns would be assigned to projects which they would manage

from inception to completion; the exception would be participation in projects whose time frame extends (either direction) beyond the time of the internship. These projects were not limited only to those suggested by the institutional researcher, but could include those of interest to the intern and/or the academic department (within the budgetary, space, time, and personnel constraints of the institutional research office). Team assignments could also be considered.

Going into the internship, students were expected to have completed introductory courses in research and/or statistics appropriate for their discipline and to have the recommendation of their department.

Under most circumstances, the time requirement would be determined by the academic department in keeping with their policies for internships and/or independent study projects. Evaluation of the experience would be based on pre-determined criteria (agreed to in advance by the department, the intern, and the institutional researcher), and would include such items as professional behavior (preserving confidentiality, meeting scheduled appointments, etc.), the completion of the assigned tasks, the nature of the supervision required, and the overall assessment of the intern's success.

Just prior to pre-registration for each following term, a brief reminder memo was sent to the department chairs encouraging them to consider students for internship positions during the coming term and providing them with a flyer to post alerting students to the possibilities.

Students interested in the intern opportunities were directed by their faculty

advisor(s) to interview with the institutional researcher. The purpose of this interview was to ascertain the level of preparation for the internship and the interests of the intern, particularly in relation to the projects scheduled for the internship period. Potential applicants were told that the intern opportunities could be competitive if there were more applicants than positions available.

Results

In response to the initial opening of intern positions, two academic departments selected three students for such an experience. Two psychology juniors were assigned specifically to projects selected in concert with their academic supervisor and the institutional research office; one of these was a study of the correlates of retention and other student flow, and the second project was a study of the relationship between the Miller-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and student characteristics and performance. A sociology senior floated between several on-going projects in the institutional research office. These included writing a report on the results of an evaluation of a study abroad program, updating information in the database of competitor information, and assisting with other projects.

The personal outcomes for the first group of interns were particularly rewarding. The research regarding the MBTI scores was deemed to be good enough by departmental faculty to be recommended for submission as a paper to the next regional meeting of the American Psychological Association, and the

proposal was accepted. The senior obtained a position in a Chicago bank largely as a result of her internship experience.

The sociology department was quick to nominate another senior for the subsequent academic year (two terms), and she was joined during the first semester by a senior mathematics major. These two interns worked collaboratively on the report of the college's survey of non-matriculating accepted applicants. The mathematics major was particularly interested in learning to use the department's SPSS-PC + statistics package; she had briefly used SPSS-X and another mainframe-based package in her statistics classes. By the end of the internship, she was capable of doing most simple processes (ie. descriptives, frequencies, crosstabs, and means) without assistance. The sociology major is presently completing the report of the annual survey of recent graduates for placement and evaluative information.

The development of the reports described above involved data entry (in many cases), observing and assisting in the statistical analysis, extracting from the statistical output the pertinent data, arraying this data in appropriate tabular and graphic forms, and reporting the results in narrative form. Microcomputer software used in developing these reports included word processing (WordPerfect 5.1), spreadsheets (Lotus and/or Quattro Pro), databases (dBase III +), and graphics (DrawPerfect and/or Quattro Pro), as well as the SPSS-PC + package.

Concern was expressed (both by faculty and administration) prior to the initiation of the internships regarding the confidential nature of much of the

information processed in the institutional research office. As mentioned earlier, one of the expectations of the intern is that she be expected to perform professionally. It is made clear to each candidate during the screening process that she will be exposed to such information; professional ethics requires that "what she sees and hears in the office stays in the office." Any breach would be grounds for immediate termination, a probable failing grade (if the experience was for academic credit), and would be noted on future recommendations and references. The only data from which the interns are expressly excluded at present is individual faculty salary information. Other aspects of professional behavior include meeting work schedules, the manner with which the intern meets the public, and her interaction with her supervisor.

One of the purposes for utilizing interns in this position is to improve office productivity. Even if the effort involved in mentoring the interns in their projects is equal to the time required by office staff to complete the same project, there is a benefit gained by the intern through the experience. In a small one-person office, where much time can be spent by an researcher in fairly simple data entry and compilation tasks, the use of an intern in doing these tasks alone can be productive. In larger offices, however, these tasks may already be assigned to other students or regular staff, and these benefits might not be as great. During the time these interns have been utilized at Saint Mary's, it has been felt that office productivity has improved through their use; further gains could be realized with the addition of equipment and space.

The present utilization of interns is specifically related to receiving academic credit for the experience. Academic departments have varied methods of providing this credit, using courses described as internships, directed and/or independent study, etc. Within the department there may be criteria regarding the use of such courses and the manner in which performance is evaluated. Generally at Saint Mary's, students receiving credit for internship experiences are expected to perform about three hours of service weekly through the entire semester for each semester hour of credit received. The use of financial remuneration, akin to the graduate assistantships and/or fellowships, also would be possible, depending on the availability of resources.

The discussion up to this point has focused primarily on the institutional benefits of using interns. A brief survey providing an evaluation of the internship experience was sent to each participating intern; their own words best describe their experience:

<u>What skills did you learn while an intern?</u>

> Some computer skills and certain procedures as far as the steps to collecting, entering, and interpreting data to be put into a report. I also was given some exposure and experience in working with a statistics program to get the stats I needed.
>
> I learned how to critically analyze and interpret data. In addition, I learned how a document is written.

I became familiar with running statistical tests on a computer. I was also able to apply what I had learned from a textbook—how to interpret results! Based on my results, I learned how to put together a research report.

Have you been able to apply these skills elsewhere? If so, how?

This internship was extremely helpful for my senior research project. Without this experience I would not have been able to analyze the information I received from my questionnaires. I knew how to take the information and present it in a meaningful manner.

Yes, it has enhanced my ability to communicate mathematical/ technical information both in written form and orally.

How was your internship related to your major and planned career? How did/will your internship experience help you with your major and career?

It dealt with taking information (raw data) and putting it into a form (stats) so we would be able to extract information from it and then communicate so it makes sense to a non-math/technical person. I would like to do something with stats as a career or go into actuary work, so it is important to be able to understand what your doing because as a math person, you need to be able to translate your knowledge to managers, the company, clients, etc. This internship

gave me experience in that translation as well as in learning/ developing skills to draw conclusions from our data.

Because I am a psychology major and plan on continuing my education, the familiarity with running statistics on a computer will help me in graduate school.

My internship was critical for my senior research class. Without it, I probably would have been one of the many who did not finish the project on time. I think the work I have done on the computer (although it has been data entry) will be important because it gave me experience. I now know how to use different programs on a computer.

What suggestions do you have for improving the internship experience?

Although the internship was very valuable, it was very time consuming. I did not have an idea of how time consuming it would be before I was involved.

What do you consider the most interesting aspects of your internship?

The most interesting aspect of my internship was uncovering the results. I found out a great deal about the student body at Saint Mary's.

I found the answers given on the questionnaires to be most interesting. Specifically, what the graduating seniors are now doing and why applicants decided not to go to Saint Mary's.

I really enjoyed working with the SPSS program to get it to perform the statistics I wanted. I also really liked writing the reports. I found it interesting to see how the data can be transformed into meaningful helpful information.

How would you rate your overall experience as an intern?

This internship has been a positive experience. When I began I was unsure that I could do all the work involved, but I now know that I can!

This internship was an all-around positive experience for me. I was involved in all the steps of the entire process up to the actual "putting the binder" on the books. Because we were really involved in the projects, we weren't just given "busy, go-for" jobs, but were given responsibilities and actually got good "hands-on" experience.

I don't think that I could have had the exposure to as many data that I had during my internship. Along with the exposure came a lot of responsibility. Having this exposure gave me a little taste of what "real" research was like.

In addition to the experiences reported, the interns were able each to keep

several copies of the reports they prepared as exhibits for future employers. The experience is also one which each felt would enhance her resume as she considered graduate school or entry into a career.

Are there problems with using student interns? Are there pitfalls which, if known in advance, could prevent problems later? Certainly it should be recognized that these are undergraduate students, who do not have the experience and knowledge base that skilled and experienced professionals have—expectations should not be set too high. It may be necessary at times to assist in polishing up the final draft to meet usual office standards.

The scheduling difficulties typical to undergraduate students also pose a potential problem. Not only is there the struggle of trying to find sufficient blocks of office time for the intern between the classes in her schedule, but when vacation breaks arrive, students don't expect that their work obligations will continue (and indeed, if the experience is for academic credit, this obligation probably should not extend beyond the usual classroom schedule). When times of peak academic activity occur (e.g., last week of the semester), students may request some relief from their work obligation. Students may also be more likely to let their work be affected by personal problems. The successful institutional researcher is one who can balance the needs of the office with those of students.

Conclusions

After more than a year of utilizing undergraduate interns, the presenter is

convinced that not only are such experiences useful in providing hands-on experiences for undergraduates while they are still in college, but also that having such persons assisting on various in-house projects enables the office to be more productive.

Not only is the hands-on experience with real data useful for these students, but the mentoring that goes on concurrently is beneficial particularly for the student contemplating a similar career. There are ample opportunities to discuss the reasons and rationale for certain practices and to share tips and suggestions that will be helpful at a later time.

A further benefit to the institutional researcher is the opportunity to discuss with the intern and her friends matters of general interest on campus, as well as those of specific and pertinent interest to the institutional research office. Too often, institutional researchers who don't have other reasons to interact with students (e.g., teaching a class or two) find it difficult to put a human face on the data they collect through computer databases and survey instruments. The intern is a real student, who has experienced and is still experiencing many of the same phenomena collected through the usual institutional research channels. Here is an opportunity to probe informally a little further into why certain events occur or why students react in the manner they do.

The use of undergraduate interns should be feasible at any higher education institution offering at least four-year programs. Where student labor is already in place, using interns provides a more professional use of students who have several

years of experience in the office; where graduate assistants are being utilized, undergraduate interns can serve in a secondary role with the graduate assistants or have smaller projects of their own.

It is hoped that the ideas presented in this paper and the description of their implementation will provide other institutional researchers with sufficient information to establish similar undergraduate internships in their offices.

Reference

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1991). How college affects students: Findings and insights from twenty years of research. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.